

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 337

UD 026 750

TITLE Second-Chance Opportunities for Hispanic Dropouts.
ERIC/CUE Digest No. 50.

INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York,
N.Y.

SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED),
Washington, DC.

PUB DATE Dec 88

CONTRACT OERI-R188062013

NOTE 4p.

PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis
Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Adult Programs; Disadvantaged Youth; *Dropouts;
Economic Opportunities; Education Work Relationship;
*Employment Opportunities; Family Financial
Resources; *High Risk Persons; *Hispanic Americans;
*Job Training; Limited English Speaking;
Nontraditional Education; Social Services; Urban
Problems; Work Experience Programs; Youth
Employment

IDENTIFIERS Job Training Partnership Act 1982

ABSTRACT

Hispanic-American dropouts are a population seriously at risk socially and economically in the United States. A recent study by the Hispanic Policy Development Project (HPDP), "Too Late to Patch: Reconsidering Second-Chance Opportunities for Hispanic and Other Dropouts," suggests a number of programs that can benefit the 1.8 million Hispanic youths between the ages of 18 and 24 who have left school without adequate preparation for entry into the workforce. This digest summarizes that study. The HPDP study finds that Hispanic dropout populations are concentrated in inner cities, where unskilled labor opportunities are declining, and that language problems and preparedness to accept underemployment further complicate the problem. Many second-chance job training programs, such as the Job Partnership Training Act of 1983, are underfunded and over-restrictive; enriched, long-term employment programs, on the other hand, have been found to succeed. "Too Late to Patch" recommends the following strategies to address the special training needs of Hispanic dropouts: (1) programs for adults with families; (2) youth programs for recent dropouts; (3) work study programs; (4) immigrant programs; and (5) programs for parents. Changes in the kinds of jobs available to Hispanic American youth can be effected through the following initiatives: (1) government programs; (2) job ladder programs; (3) public works programs; (4) entrepreneurship programs; and (5) job improvement. (AF)

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SECOND-CHANCE OPPORTUNITIES FOR HISPANIC DROPOUTS

While the recent emphasis on strengthening early childhood interventions for at-risk youth is essential, such efforts do not help the approximately 1.8 million Hispanic youths between the ages of 18 and 24 who have already left school without the skills they need to earn a living wage. In a recently completed study, *Too Late to Patch: Reconsidering Second-Chance Opportunities for Hispanic and Other Dropouts*, The Hispanic Policy Development Project (HPDP) examined programs designed to help Hispanic dropouts avoid a lifetime at the margins of society and of the economy. This digest is based on HPDP's findings and recommendations.

The Characteristics of Hispanic Youth

At-risk Hispanic youth do not constitute a homogeneous group whose problems will respond to a single solution. But they do all share many special characteristics that must be considered in providing appropriate social services, and a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness that discourages them from returning to school or taking advantage of job training programs.

Hispanic-American populations are most heavily concentrated in the inner-cities of California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas—all states where once-prevalent unskilled occupations are declining, and where employment prospects must be improved generally in order for job programs for Hispanics to succeed. Because they are geographically concentrated, they are particularly vulnerable to regional economic downturns. Many are also not competent in English, further limiting both their career potential and their mobility.

Money is a high priority need among Hispanic youth. Hispanics work more hours as students than any other group, and after leaving high school, the need for immediate income motivates a large proportion to accept underemployment instead of seeking supplementary job training. Thus, they are more likely to benefit from programs that offer a combination of work and study than from those that are purely educational.

Job Training for Hispanic Youths

The U.S. is already spending a sizable sum on providing job training to Hispanic youths, from which there is not a commensurate return in employability. In the current cost-cutting legislative environment, what are conceived as comprehensive, individualized training services often emerge as under-funded, bare-bones initiatives that operate in a vacuum, and succeed in benefiting only the minimally at-risk. What little experience there has been with enriched, long-term programs has suggested, however, that they do indeed work.

The need for these programs has become even more critical as traditional sources of unskilled employment offering a living wage rapidly disappear. Many unskilled, relatively well-paid industrial jobs—such as those formerly available on automobile assembly lines—have been replaced by positions requiring highly developed skills. And today's high-tech armed forces—once a source of subsidized job training—are increasingly closed to unskilled dropouts. This escalating mismatch between available workers and jobs will not only undermine the ability of business and industry to compete economically, but will also create crushing social burdens.

The second-chance job training options that now exist for dropouts are inadequate. The Job Partnership Training Act (JPTA) of 1983, for example, is so limited in its funding and so restrictive in its requirements that it seems to present its beneficiaries with more barriers than opportunities.

There can be no question that JPTA programs will not benefit the populations they purport to serve without receiving a substantial increase in funding. The Act must also be restructured so that renewal of programs does not depend so heavily upon immediate success. Furthermore, the Private Industry Councils (PICs) that administer JPTA programs must become better informed about the problems the programs are intended to solve.

Meeting the Special Training Needs of Dropouts

A wide range of programs are needed to help Hispanic dropouts gain full employment, and an evaluation mechanism should be built into each. Over time, a record of successful strategies will emerge that will help to inform the continued efforts of legislators and policymakers to maximize the return on investment of public funds. Among the most promising types of programs are the following:

Adult Programs. For many older, long-term dropouts, intervention becomes particularly problematic. Even the minimal academic skills they once had probably eroded over time, leaving them ineligible for programs with minimum skills requirements. Also, because Hispanics tend to form families earlier than do other groups, remote residential programs such as those offered by the Job Corps are often not appropriate for them. Adult education programs and remedial college programs can help meet the needs of older dropouts. Services designed to reach young mothers can be effectively delivered in combination with early-childhood programs. Intensive outreach efforts are needed to attract these dropouts to the appropriate programs that do exist.

Youth Programs. Programs designed to help more recent dropouts must recognize that these youths often have profound human needs stemming from dysfunctional living environments as well as educational needs, and that short-term financial needs must be met before long-term educational goals can be addressed.

Schools or other government agencies should be made responsible for monitoring the progress of students even after they have left school. Alternative schools should be made available to students who have failed in a traditional educational setting. Above all, personal and career counseling must be made readily available to all youths who need it.

Work Study Programs. Dropouts must be able to combine education with work in order to enter the economic mainstream. On-the-job training programs should ideally teach academic skills through practical application, and provide the analytical skills needed to transfer the knowledge gained from one job to another. If programs do not provide living stipends, they must be made flexible enough to allow students to support themselves while they learn. Training partnerships with businesses and labor unions are essential to making these second-chance work-and-learn programs work.

The concept of apprenticeships, such as those long sponsored by trade unions, can be expanded to offer at-risk students job-guarantee incentives to stay in school. Older dropouts can receive guaranteed employment in return for fulfilling work-study contracts. Employers who offer young Hispanics low-level service jobs can be given incentives to combine employment with education. For example, fast-food businesses might receive rewards for offering their workers remediation in English. The objective is to make work an educational experience for everybody.

Immigrant Programs. The problems of Hispanic workers will continue to compound as their numbers are swelled by the high entry rate of Hispanic immigrants, most of whom will be poorly educated. Immigrant dropouts have special needs, including bilingual orientation and referral services, as well as cultural transition programs. Hispanic immigrants would doubtless benefit from the types of resettlement programs that are offered to other ethnic group refugees.

Program for Parents. Young Hispanic mothers cannot take advantage of training or educational opportunities until the needs of their children are met. Hispanic mothers need to be allowed to work a reduced schedule while retaining some of their fringe benefits. There is also a need for employer-sponsored childcare.

Providing Jobs

Although an atmosphere of general economic expansion creates an increase in the number of jobs available to all workers, there must be a change in the kinds of jobs available to Hispanics in order for them to prosper. National growth alone is unlikely to enable low-skilled, low-income Hispanics to defeat under-employment.

Government Programs. Those federal programs that benefit all states equally do not take into account that Hispanics are geographically concentrated. So-called "trigger" programs do not help Hispanics when localized Hispanic unemployment is high, but the national jobless rates to which the programs are "pegged" remain low. An equitable service-distribution policy would concentrate funds for job programs in areas with the greatest density of the most disadvantaged Hispanics.

In addition, where improved opportunities are persistently lacking, government funds can be used to create jobs that will also develop skills marketable elsewhere.

Income transfer benefits (such as Aid for Families with Dependent Children) can be used to subsidize the job training programs of private employers if workers are allowed to continue receiving them while they are preparing for new careers. Such a subsidy will also induce mothers with dependent children to enter the workforce if they can do so without compromising their living standard or health care benefits.

Job Ladder Programs. The "baby bust," which has caused a shortage of professional workers in some occupations, can provide the impetus for job ladder programs, in which training can help entry-level workers move into higher-level positions as their skills increase.

Public Works Programs. The imminent massive effort to improve the nation's infrastructure will be concentrated in the areas where most Hispanics live. New public works projects will provide jobs for well-trained workers, but slight opportunity for the unskilled. Criteria for accepting bids for these construction projects can encourage the creation of job-training opportunities for disadvantaged workers where Hispanic unemployment and under-employment is most prevalent.

Entrepreneurship Programs. Well-paid jobs for Hispanics with limited education can be created by encouraging Hispanic entrepreneurship, as long as strong back-up support is made available until fledgling managers gain business experience.

Job Improvement. Jobs that Hispanics already hold can be improved. Increasing the minimum wage will provide additional income for the families of low-wage earners. Increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit will improve take-home pay without increasing wages. Establishing a national health insurance program, extending unemployment insurance coverage to smaller firms, and providing fringe benefits to part-time workers will improve economic security for Hispanic families.

Providing new training and employment opportunities, restructuring jobs, and improving benefits are all essential to extending equitable employment practices to Hispanics.

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This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education with funding from Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. R188062013. The opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

**Office of Educational
Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education**

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